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The Million Dollar Out of the White House Give Them the Heat But Always Stay Cool Shapeless Sport Coat Known as Bill Safire

By Vic Gold

(EXCERPT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM SAFIRE)

Safire: "Nobody around here tells me what to write or not to write. I'm my own man, limited only by the laws of libel, which don't concern me because I know that I harbor no malice, and even more important, I have a high regard for the truth. Before I turn in a piece, I've checked it out thoroughly, and working for the *Times* I've had the benefit of watching the best in the business, pros like Sy Hersh. I have a lot of respect for Hersh, but I doubt if I'll learn to use the telephone as well as he does. He's one of the best badgerers in town, and to be successful in investigative reporting you have to know how to badger, to stay after people in positions of power who want to stonewall on stories. Take Stansfield Turner. Now Turner, there's the guy who was supposed to open the doors and let in fresh air at the CIA, and he won't even return calls. I interpret that as a sign of weakness, a sure indication that what I'm dealing with is a public official who can't stand the heat."

It is 2 PM and Bill Safire, having lunched on a chef's salad at Duke Zeibert's, is back in his office, waiting for the one call that will wrap up his day. On schedule, the phone rings. It is not Stansfield Turner, but the columnist's source on Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, "the one guy," as he describes him, "who hasn't been talked to by anybody else." But now he'll talk to Safire, as, sooner or later, will Stansfield Turner, if he stays in the kitchen long enough. It's inevitable, given Safire's talent for being in the right place at the right time: Jimmy Carter's CIA director will either call him back or one day find himself trapped in the barber's chair at Milton Pitts's establishment, with Bill Safire there to pull up a stool. □